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The Lessons of Anaconda

By SEAN NAYLOR MARCH 2, 2003

A year ago today a couple of hundred American soldiers found themselves greeting the dawn aboard Chinook helicopters weaving through mountain passes toward rocky landing zones 8,000 feet high. They were the first wave of troops to enter eastern Afghanistan's forbidding Shah-i-Kot Valley as part of Operation Anaconda. The largest battle involving conventional United States troops to be fought in Afghanistan, Anaconda should serve as a cautionary tale for Americans convinced that our technological superiority is a foolproof defense against the element of surprise in the mountains of Afghanistan, the streets of Baghdad or on any other future battlefield.

The first hint that forces from Al Qaeda were gathering in the Shah-i-Kot Valley came in December 2001 from Special Forces soldiers operating out of the nearby town of Gardez. Throughout January and February, the Americans compiled an intelligence picture of the valley that suggested 150 to 250 Qaeda fighters were living among about 800 civilians in three villages on the valley floor. These fighters -- including Arabs, Chechens, Uzbeks and Uighur Chinese -- had escaped from Tora Bora, the Qaeda stronghold to the north, and were now preparing to launch a counteroffensive against the provisional government of Hamid Karzai and his American protectors. The intelligence indicated they were armed with little more than a few heavy machine guns.

At first, Special Forces soldiers thought they could handle the operation themselves. But as estimates of the enemy force grew, Lt. Gen. P. T. Mikolashek, who commanded United States ground forces in the Central Command area of

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headquarters, which was moved from Uzbekistan to Bagram Air Base, north of Kabul. Determined to prevent a recurrence of the Tora Bora experience, when local Afghan militias had failed to prevent hundreds of Qaeda fighters from slipping away to Pakistan, American commanders decided to use three light-infantry battalions under the command of the 101st Airborne Division's Third Brigade.

In a series of meetings held in Bagram's bombed-out buildings by a motley cast of regular Army officers, bearded Special Forces soldiers, Central Intelligence Agency agents, Navy Seals and Delta Force commandos, a plan came together.

Under cover of darkness, 300 Afghans with their Special Forces advisers would sweep toward the valley by convoy from the west, as the first wave of troops flew by helicopter to the southern and eastern sides of the valley. United States commanders figured that the enemy, after realizing that allied forces were blocking their avenues of escape in three directions, would huddle for most of the day before fleeing for "ratlines" to the northeast -- the only direction seemingly left open to them. At this point, a second wave of air assault troops would land and establish new blocking positions, effectively "slamming the door" on the Qaeda forces. Moreover, enemy fighters who slipped this noose and escaped the valley would run into an outer ring of special operations troops and Afghan allies. The concentric rings of troops would squeeze the enemy position -- hence the name, Anaconda, the snake that strangles its prey.

The assumed presence of civilians on the battlefield drove much of the plan. The decision to use a large contingent of friendly Afghan forces was taken partly because American commanders thought Afghans would be better at distinguishing enemy fighters from civilians. The infantry's blocking positions were little more than rudimentary roadblocks intended to sift Qaeda troops from the civilians who were expected to try to escape the valley. The plan was to kill or capture the Qaeda personnel while keeping the civilians in the valley.

As one of the few journalists allowed to witness the operation firsthand, I sat in Bagram's tent city watching soldiers learn how to search civilians safely without offending local mores. Officers discussed how to spot a Qaeda fighter dressed as a woman by looking at his feet.

Above all, American officers stressed to their troops the importance of avoiding

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When all was said and done, it was estimated that the operation would last several days -- five at the most.

The estimates were wrong. Operation Anaconda, which ended on March 18, 2002, lasted more than two weeks.

The operation ran into problems from the start. The enemy was not concentrated in the villages, but spread across the valley's ridges, and was better equipped -- with mortars and artillery -- than intelligence had predicted. Instead of hunkering down and then making a break for it, the Qaeda fighters stood and fought. The Shah-i-Kot Valley, it turned out, was devoid of civilians.

Even before the Special Forces advisers and Afghan fighters got to the valley, their convoy came under fire, and they spent the day sheltering from mortars and rocket-propelled grenades before withdrawing to Gardez. Qaeda guerrillas also attacked the first wave of air-assault troops to land in the south and east of the valley, pinning down 86 soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division under mortar and heavy machine-gun fire. The soldiers survived because they were brave and well trained, and because their commanders remained cool as bullets rained down from the mountains.

Meanwhile senior officers from the 101st Airborne's Third Brigade, who had flown down in two Black Hawk helicopters intending to stay only an hour in order to get the lay of the land and a feel for the battle, found themselves stuck on a ridge all day dodging Qaeda bullets. Back at Bagram, the 10th Mountain Division commander, Maj. Gen. Franklin L. Hagenbeck, discussed pulling all American troops out and starting again. In the end, he decided to withdraw the 10th Mountain troops in the south, but to send reinforcements into the northern end of the valley.

Far from trying to run, the enemy -- now estimated at about 1,000 fighters -- gathered reinforcements and resisted fiercely. Slowly, though, the American effort, buttressed by heavy air bombardment, started to grind down the Qaeda forces. Judging from what I saw on the battlefield, and what I've learned from people involved in the operation, it's likely that hundreds of enemy fighters were killed. While it's impossible to say how many got away, it is clear that senior enemy leaders escaped, including Tohir Yuldeshev, head of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

That the operation didn't go as planned is no disgrace. It is a cliché that no plan

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operation involving American troops anywhere on the planet. In the days before its launch, commanders assured their troops that "every national asset" -- satellites, spy planes, Predator drones -- was focused on the valley. Yet despite these high-tech systems, the intelligence estimate failed to accurately portray the enemy's size, location, principal weapons and course of action. Those same overhead systems also failed to notice that there were no civilians in the valley.

Qaeda soldiers found numerous ways to hide from the unblinking eyes focused on their positions. Some would hug trees as Predators passed overhead. Others simply hid under dirt-colored blankets or established fighting positions in rock crevices.

Eight Americans and a handful of friendly Afghan troops were killed in the operation. Conventional and special operations troops fought bravely and well, and enough seasoned enemy fighters died for the operation to be deemed at least a qualified success.

But as the United States prepares for another, much bigger war in Iraq, officials in Washington, particularly those who speak with such assurance about the strength of American intelligence and technology, would do well to remember the battle that began a year ago today in Afghanistan's mountains. After all, solid plans and advanced surveillance systems are no guarantee against nasty surprises in the Tigris and Euphrates valley.

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